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THE BOY WRECKER:

OR,

The Young Pilot of the Breakers.

By ROGER STARBUCK.



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The Boy Wrecker;

OR,

The Young Pilot of the Breakers.

By ROGER STARBUCK,

Author of "The Lost Roy Captain; or, The Secret of the Hidden Whirlpool," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE DISAPPEARANCE.

"STRANGE! What can have become of Will? Both he and the boat have vanished as if they had melted in air!"

"Ay, Dick, the queerest thing I ever heard of, and I have sailed the sea for forty years."

The first speaker was Richard Topman—a fine, spirited boy of seventeen—the other was his uncle, Captain Ben—a weatherbeaten tar, short and square of figure, with keen, kindly blue eyes.

The two stood on the deck of the ship Comet—a small, clipper-built craft, with decks as white as snow and brass-work polished to shine like gold.

Both the captain and the boy were anxious and concerned.

It was Dick's chum, Will Warden, who had so mysteriously disappeared.

Will Warden was a good-looking young fellow of seventeen, the second officer of the Comet, which now—just before midnight—was standing along, before a light breeze, in the Pacific ocean, on her way to the Marquesas Islands.

It was a clear, moonlight night, and Will had been seated in the dingy, which was towing astern, repairing one of the thwarts, while Dick was in the cabin helping his uncle out with his log. He had been in the habit of doing this ever since his fifteenth year, at which period he had left school to go to sea with his relative, who had adopted him from childhood, after the death of his parents.

Dick and the captain remained below about an hour and a half.

When they came on deck, it chanced that the nephew, casting a glance over the stern, discovered that both the boat and Will had vanished.

What had become of them?

Fore and aft this question was asked, but no one could answer it.

Neither the helmsman nor the lookout had heard any noise, or seen anything of the boat or its occupant.

They had been looking ahead, as also had the watch, toward a dangerous island far in the distance, with ledges extending from it, and with reefs nearly surrounding it, which the ship was approaching, and which would prove dangerous to pass.

As the breeze was light, and the vessel was under top-sails, the boat, if it had in any manner drifted from the ship, should be still in sight.

But no sign of it was to be discovered.

Far and near the sailors scrutinized the ocean, vainly looking for it.

About half a mile astern there was a small detached reef rising a few feet above the sea.

It was not likely that the boat would be found among the rocks of this reef.

Nevertheless, the captain resolved to go and examine it.

He, therefore, hove to and lowered the quarter-boat.

His nephew, Dick, accompanied him.

The reef soon was reached, but there was no sign there of Will or the missing boat.

The captain returned to the ship.

"Were it not that no noise was heard I should think some monster of the sea had caught the boat in its jaws and dove down into the depths with it," remarked the first mate.

"There are no such monsters—at least, not hereabouts," answered the captain.

Dick sat down, and, with a heavy heart, thought of his missing chum.

The two had been chums for some years and were much attached to each other.

Will, like Dick, was an orphan.

He had been used to the sea almost from childhood, and therefore was more of a sailor than his friend.

This rendered his disappearance all the more singular.

Even if the boat had drifted from the ship, he would have known how to work it, so as to meet the vessel on her next tack, as well as to prevent any casualty.

The mysterious occurrence was long talked over by the sailors.

At last the watch was relieved, but Dick did not go below.

A calm had fallen, and as he stood looking over the rail, he noticed that the ship was gradually drifting down near the small reef.

Finally the vessel passed the edge of this reef and within about two fathoms of it.

There was a leadsman over the side making soundings.

The depth, however, was found to be safe enough, and it was evident the ship would soon drift beyond the end of the line of rocks.

All at once it seemed to Dick that, as he peered at the reef, he saw a slight movement of one of the smaller rocks.

In order to see better, and without having mentioned the circumstance to any of his shipmates, he went forward, and clambering down into the ship's head, descended to the bobstays.

Then he looked keenly at the fragment of rock which he fancied had moved.

All the sailors of the watch were amidships at the time.

Therefore, when a sudden unexpected roll of the vessel caused Dick, who was keeping a rather careless hold of the stay, to slip into the sea, none knew that this had happened.

Before the boy could cry out, the bow, as it fell with the sea, slantingly struck his head with force enough to temporarily stun him.

Dick sank as the current carried the ship on, and the great hull went sliding past him.

But the cold water partly revived him, and he now struck out mechanically.

But he was as yet so bewildered and confused that he had not sense enough to call out.

By the time his senses were fully restored the ship was about forty fathoms off.

A sudden breeze now had sprung up, and the shouting of the deck officer, blended with the rattling of canvas and the roar of the vessel's bows as the craft gathered way, drowned Dick's voice when he shouted.

He saw the vessel receding further from him every moment in the dim moonlight.

In vain did he toss his arm and repeat his cries.

The ship had now tacked, and her stern was toward him as she headed along on her course.

Remembering to have seen a piece of drift-wood on the rocks when he visited them with his uncle, he now struck out for the reef.

The fragment of drift-wood, which was about five feet long, would, with his kerchief attached to the end, serve him for a signal.

He was a good swimmer, and it did not take him more than ten minutes to reach the reef.

He landed near the rock on which was the fragment which had appeared to move.

A few feet from him he saw the stick of drift-wood.

But just as he was about to seize it, he was grasped by a strong hand and pulled down upon his back.

He was quickly jerked into a sort of hollow or cave, where he found himself in nearly total darkness, and ere he could say a word nimble fingers bound his wrists with cords.

"Now we have two of you," was uttered in a deep, hoarse voice.

The speaker, as well as Dick could make out in the partial gloom, was a heavily-framed, hard-featured man, wearing a sou'wester and rough sailor clothes.

"Why have you dragged me into this place?" inquired the boy, much alarmed, "and who and what are you?"

"Do not be afraid," was the answer. "We have only got you into this place because we did not want you to signal and bring any boat to discover this rocky watch-house of ours. We were afraid you would detect it when when you and the captain, with his boat's crew, came here to look for your missing shipmate. As to what we are, you will soon know, but, if you behave yourself, you will have nothing to fear."

"You spoke of my missing shipmate. Have you seen anything of him?"

"Ay, that we have. Here he is now, but whether he is yet able to speak to you or not we cannot tell. One thing is sure. We are not going to venture to strike a light as yet, to draw the attention of your craft this way. The light would show through the crevices of the rock."

"Where is he? Where is my friend Will? Take me to his side. What has happened to him? How came he here?"

"You ask too many questions at once. Your friend, as you call him, is hurt."

"You, then, have hurt him!" cried Dick, indignantly.

"No. He drifted here in a boat, wherein he lay senseless. We took him in, together with his boat, for the same reason we have taken you. We dragged the dingey into this cave."

"How was he hurt?"

"How do we know? One thing is probable. A crowbar did the mischief."

"A crowbar!" cried Dick, aghast.

"Ay, exactly. Some good friend of his must have given him a tap."

"Where was he hurt?"

"On the head, of course, but I don't think his skull was fractured."

"Who could have done it?" said Dick, in surprise.

He tried to think of some person aboard the ship who had a grudge against his chum, but Will had been a favorite there, and he could not imagine any sailor's having a feeling of ill-will toward the youth.

The blow must have been dealt from the cabin window, which was open, the dead-light being swung back.

Now, then, who was in the room adjoining the one occupied by the captain and his nephew at the time Will was in the dingey towing astern?

Certainly no one, it was thought, save either the cabin-boy or the steward.

One of these two must, it seemed, have inflicted the blow.

The cabin-boy was a mere lad of thirteen, and it was not likely that he had given the stroke.

The steward was a young man of twenty-five named Rono, a Spaniard.

Was it he who for some reason, known only to himself, had dealt the cowardly blow?

CHAPTER II.

PRISONERS.

Dick could see three men moving about the cave in the gloom.

Finally one of them, raising the slab of the rock which was placed over the entrance of the cave, looked forth.

He returned a minute later and whispered to his two companions.

Then a lamp was lighted, and Dick looked about him.

The cave was about ten by twelve feet in size.

It was in the rock which has been mentioned as being on the reef.

The entrance was in the top, which was covered by the closely fitting slab.

There were a few crevices in the rock, serving to admit a supply of air.

On a sort of mat, in one corner, close to a canoe and the ship's dingey, which last, as stated, had been dragged into the place, the boy beheld the form of his chum.

He lay upon his side, and there was a bandage about his head.

His face was pale, and his eyes were half closed.

"Will!" cried Dick, going to his side. "Oh, Will, do you not know me?"

The youth stretched out his hand.

At the same moment one of the three men unbound Dick's cords.

Instantly he grasped the hand of his friend, who pressed it while he said:

"Yes, Dick, I am much better, and I know you. Don't worry. It was an ugly knock, but I'm almost as well as ever now."

"Have you any idea who struck you?"

"No; there's the mystery. I had turned while directly under the cabin window, when all I remember is—crash! here on my head. Then I knew no more until I found myself in this strange place."

"It must have been the steward who struck you."

"It hardly seems so. He always appeared to be a quiet fellow. Don't accuse him, Dick. It may not have been he. Some one else may have contrived to slip into the cabin."

"Well, whoever it was, you are badly hurt, chum. A pity it is you are in this uncomfortable place."

"I'd rather be aboard the ship, of course. Now, Dick, tell me how on earth you came here."

Dick's story was soon told.

"It seems a little queer that you should have been hurt on the head, too."

"Ay, but it all came about naturally enough. What do you think these people here are?" added the boy, in a low voice, noticing that the three were conversing on the other side of the cave.

"I cannot imagine. I don't think they are pirates."

"Nor I, but I believe they are lawless fellows of some sort."

The two lads were still talking over their situation when one of the three men came up and said to Will:

"How do you feel, now?"

"I am well enough to go back to my ship."

The man smiled.

"You'll not see her very soon," he remarked.

"Why? Is she out of sight?"

"No, she is now about two leagues off."

"She may wear and come this way," said Dick. "If she does, you will please get the boat out of here, and help me put my friend in it, that we may return to her."

"You will have no chance. What is the cargo of your ship?"

"Hardware and miscellaneous articles."

"Humph!—probably a valuable cargo," said the man, exchanging glances with his companions.

"Ay, Bill, good enough," responded one of them.

The men filled their pipes and began to smoke.

Presently one of them said:

"It's going to blow. There are wind-clouds off to the north'ard."

"What kind of a navigator is your captain?" queried the man who had been called Bill, turning to Dick.

"First class."

"That won't help him if the gale comes from the north'ard. He's bound to lay his bones somewhere on the reefs."

This declaration seemed to please all.

Will looked uneasily at his friend. Well, did he know that the man was right—that few vessels could avoid those perilous reefs if caught near them by a gale.

"I see," said Dick, in a low voice to his friend, when the three men had again walked off to the further corner of the cave—"these fellows are wreckers!"

"Ay, so I have thought."

As Will thus spoke, the men took hold of the dingey and began to pull it out of the cave.

The canoe was also hauled forth.

"Now you will go with us," said one of the trio to Dick.

"Where?"

"You will soon know. Your friend can be helped along."

Will, by this time, was so much better that he was able to rise, and once on his feet, he found he could walk without assistance to the boat.

The mouth of the cave was then reclosed, and the canoe having been secured to the stern of the boat, the latter was rowed on its way.

It was headed toward the distant reefs, at right-angles with the course being pursued by the ship, which now was nearly out of sight.

Finally a small island containing a thick growth of cocoanuts and a fantastic pile of rocks not far from the shore, was reached.

The boat and the canoe were pulled into a sort of hidden cove, and the boys then were conducted to a larger cavern than the one they had quitted.

This cave contained about twenty-one fierce-looking men, variously attired.

One of them wore clothes like those of a citizen of that period.

The moment the boys met his gaze, he cried out:

"Who have we here?"

"Two lads who may be useful to us, Captain Brand," said the man Bill.

He then explained how the boys had fallen into his hands.

"Will you join us?" inquired the captain of the lads. "We are wreckers, and sometimes we make a good haul, which we divide amongst our men."

"No!" cried Dick and Will simultaneously.

"Oh! so you refuse?"

"We do," was the answer.

"Well, you know too much about us now to be permitted to leave us. But you may change your minds after being shut up in the place where we are going to put you."

He made a sign to several of the men, who then conducted both boys to a rock near the sea.

The rock had an opening, which was closed by a large fragment of granite.

This being shoved aside, both lads were pushed through the opening.

They went down about seven feet, upon a soft bed of sand, which prevented their being hurt by their fall.

"You will alter your minds about joining us before long. When you are ready to tell us so, call out," cried one of the men. "We will hear you."

Then the rock was shoved back over the opening and the men went away.

Dick and Will looked round them in dismay.

The latter was now so far recovered from the effect of the blow he had received, that he felt nearly as well as ever.

All about the lads, visible by the moonlight stealing down through crevices in the rocks, were numbers of black, horrid-looking objects swaying to and fro.

Taking matches from a rubber safe in his pocket, Dick lighted one against the rocky surface of the cave, thus plainly disclosing the swaying forms.

They were found to be huge black sea-spiders—a strange species of the insect, and as large as tarantulas.

There they were, swinging to and fro by dozens, hanging to long webs which extended downward from the roof. As they swung, their numerous legs were kept in motion, while their little eyes seemed to gleam with an expression of evil intelligence.

All at once it seemed as if they noticed the boys for the first time, and now in myriads did they swing towards them. Vainly did the lads strike at them with their hands.

The vicious insects came crawling toward them, and in a moment their trousers were nearly covered with them.

With both hands they brushed them off, and then retreated behind a projecting angle of rock, where they hoped they would not be molested by these fierce spiders.

CHAPTER III.

A GALE.

For a long time the lads saw no more of the pests which had troubled them.

At last the light of dawn stole into the cave.

The rock behind which they had crouched had in it a crevice, through which they could see the multitudinous forms of the insects and their net-work of webs.

There they were, swinging or running hither and thither.

So many were they that their legs, heads and bodies all seemed to blend in a confused medley.

Now and then they would meet—sometimes singly and again by groups—in deadly combat.

A strange spectacle did they present, darting at each other, rolling over and over, or leaping about with wondrous agility as they thus fought.

Hoping they would not be discovered by the insects, the boys remained for hours in their position behind the angle.

"What are we to do, Dick?" inquired Will.

"We can only stay here," answered his friend. "I see no way of leaving the place."

"We will starve to death."

As he spoke, however, he observed some mussels adhering to the base of the wall.

Then he pulled out his knife, and the two boys were soon partaking of the shell-fish.

They were of excellent flavor, and it might be said that the young sailors made a good meal, under the circumstances.

Meanwhile, Will kept his gaze upon the fragment of rock which had been replaced over the opening of the cave.

This was about seven feet above the ground, and so smooth were the sides of the rock that there was no way of climbing up to it.

Suddenly the idea of using a portion of the rocky angle to enable him and his companion to reach the fragment occurred to the boy.

The crevice through which the friends had been looking at the spiders extended through the middle of the rock which formed the angle.

By pushing at the upper part it seemed as if it might be dislodged, and this dislodged part would evidently fall directly under the closed opening of the cave.

Thus a stepping-stone would be formed by standing upon which the boys could reach the fragment over the entrance and push it away.

Will mentioned his idea to Dick, who thought it was a good one.

The lads then set to work, and as the upper part of the angle-rock was loose they easily shoved it off.

It fell as they had expected, and they mounted it to find themselves able to place both hands on the fragment over the opening.

But as they pushed at this, the army of spiders in the cavern again came thronging toward them.

All about the boys did they swing, lighting on them in numbers, until the lads' forms were nearly covered. Vainly did they endeavor to brush them off.

They clung to them, and soon they felt the prick of the creatures' sharp prongs about their bodies.

Meanwhile, faster and faster did the ugly insects swarm upon them.

Their bites were almost maddening, and the boys realized that, unless they could rid themselves of these pests, they must finally perish. But how was this to be done?

The air about them was fairly black with the repulsive little creatures swinging by their webs.

Which way soever the friends might move, they would be sure to come into contact with the spiders.

"This is awful, Will," said Dick, as he fought with both hands against his ugly antagonists.

"There is, I judge, only one way to escape them," said Will, "and that I shall not do."

"What way may that be?" inquired Dick.

"By calling out that we are ready to join the wreckers."

"I would sooner suffer everything than do that," said Dick.

"And I, too."

All at once a sudden idea flashed upon Dick's mind.

He remembered that nearly all insects are repelled by the smell of sulphur.

He had plenty of matches yet remaining in his rubber safe, and it now occurred to him that he might make good use of them.

He pulled the safe from his pocket, took out a match and lighting it, threw it among the tangled webs.

Another and still another did he throw into the webs.

"What's that for?" inquired Will.

Dick pointed at the spiders which covered their bodies, and which now were acting in a singular manner. They all ceased to bite, and, wriggling wildly about, many of them dropped from the forms of the lads.

Still Dick continued to throw his lighted matches about until the smell of sulphur in the cave was almost unbearable.

The spiders dropping to the ground by dozens from the boys and from their webs, run along the ground, tumbling over each other, and speeding toward the holes which were in some parts of the rocky wall. Into these holes they darted until, finally, to Will's astonishment, not only were he and his friend clear of them, but there was not one to be seen in the cave.

"Who would have thought those matches would have had that effect?" said the young second mate.

"It is the sulphur. No insect, I believe, can endure the smell of that," said Dick.

"Well, it was a bright idea of yours, but how are you, after those bites? It seems to me as if I still feel them?"

"So it seems to be with me. I hope they are not poisonous."

"A good bath in the salt water, after we get away from here, doubtless will benefit us both, if it does not cure us."

"We will lose no time in trying to leave this place."

"No. Now both push at once, and I think we can dislodge the fragment."

The boys laid their hands on the rock, and shoved at it with all their might.

It soon gave way, for it had been placed on end, so that, large as it was, it was not hard to move.

Having but four feet to climb, the friends easily drew themselves up to the opening of the cavern.

"Which way?" inquired Dick gazing around him.

"There," said Will, pointing to a pile of rocky fragments close to the beach.

Thither the boys hurried, and crept into a hollow among the fragments of rock.

Before going, however, they had taken the precaution to push the piece of rock over the entrance of the cave they had escaped from.

The hollow in which they were at present was elevated above the sea, and afforded them a good view to its broad expanse.

The signs of a heavy gale now were apparent.

Clouds were rolling up from the horizon, and there was a long line of white water in that direction.

Reefs and shoals extended around this island to some distance, and off one of these reefs the friends could perceive a sail which they at once recognized to be that of their own vessel—the Comet.

There she was, under shortened canvas, heading away from the perilous reefs to give them a good offing.

It was evident, however, that the gale would strike her ere she could beat up far against the wind.

She would then be in great peril, as she would be driven among the reefs by the gale.

Nevertheless, Will and Dick were anxious to get aboard the vessel.

The former, thrusting forth an arm with a kerchief in his hand, was about to signal her when Dick pulled him back.

The form of one of the wreckers was visible as he lay on his belly not far off watching the ship.

Will's arm was drawn back just in time to escape his attention, for it now chanced that he glanced toward the retreat occupied by the boys.

All at once there was a loud peal of thunder, followed by a sharp flash of lightning.

This was the herald of the storm.

The clouds came driving heavily along the sky, and a moaning noise, like that of a conch shell, was heard to windward.

Will, clutching his friend's arm, pointed toward the line of white water.

It had now risen to the height of a high wall, and was rolling along with a hollow roar like thunder.

"God help our ship!" ejaculated Dick.

"Captain Topman knows what he is about," answered Will. "There, see! He has brought the ship's head round and is almost under bare poles."

"Ay, but he cannot help being driven among the reefs."

"He has a pretty good knowledge of this place, and, if any one can navigate it safely, he is the man."

The friends watched the course of the wall of white water.

Seen in the distance, it looked to be as high as a ship's gallant-yard, but the boys knew it was lower than that.

On it came, the crash of its roaring waters sounding louder every moment.

Finally it was close astern of the ship.

"Now," gasped Dick.

"Ay, now—now!" cried Will, setting his teeth.

As he spoke the white water-wall struck the ship.

It rolled straight over it, washing everything on deck, even to the caboose and casks before it.

The ship's hull remained invisible.

Only the tumultuous whirling masses of white water were seen.

"Good God! the craft has foundered!" cried Dick.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WATER-PIT.

As Dick thus spoke first the bow and then the after part of the engulfed ship rose from the seas.

The men aboard were seen clinging to the ropes and belaying-pins, which they had grasped to save themselves from being swept overboard.

The craft now was heading straight for the reefs.

But old Captain Topman made his voice heard above the roaring of the gale as he gave his orders to the man at the wheel.

On came the craft, and soon she was close to the rocks.

The skipper contrived to direct her toward a passage between them.

This passage was about fifteen fathoms wide.

By keeping before the wind the captain could pursue it for some distance. Then, as it branched off, he would be obliged to luff to save himself from being dashed to pieces on a mass of rocks rising from that part of the water.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to luff in time in such a gale.

The wreckers, who now were visible standing on the part of the island which bordered the passage, seemed well aware of this fact.

There they were, greedily watching the approaching craft, hoping for the catastrophe which would bring them their coveted gains.

So near were they to the friends, hiding-place, that they could hear the voices of the men raised above the din of the gale.

"If the captain knew enough to keep off into the leeward channel, he might save himself!" cried one.

"Ay!" said another. "He has only to go fifty fathoms from here to reach it."

"Thank fortune it is a narrow passage, and he will not think to try it," remarked the first speaker.

"I hope not, for we'll lose our chance if he does."

"I will do my best to save the ship," said Will. "I will run to that leeward passage of which the wreckers have spoken, and try, by shouts and signs, to induce Topman to enter it."

"You will in that case be recaptured by the wreckers," said Dick.
 "I am ready to go for the sake of saving the ship and her crew. Besides, we would probably be recaptured in any case."

"I will go with you," cried Dick."

The intervening rocks and the noise of the gale prevented the boys' voices from being heard by the group of men near them.

"Well, there is no time to lose," said Will.

Drawing themselves from the hollow, the lads started on a run in the direction of the channel.

They passed behind the wreckers, who did not see them until they were some paces distant.

"Halloa, there! Come back!" shouted one of the men.

All were surprised to see the boys who had been shut up in the cave now at liberty.

They hurried toward them, but the friends ran with great speed, until at length they found themselves by the leeward channel.

Meanwhile the crew of the ship had noticed the group of evil-looking men on shore, and had seen the boys when they ran.

Captain Topman quickly took a survey of the latter through his glass.

Though they were about half a mile distant, he recognized them.

Wondering how they came there, he kept his gaze on them while carefully guiding his ship.

As soon as they reached the leeward passage the boys, by signs, tried to indicate to the skipper that it was the proper channel to take.

The captain, however, either because he did not understand them or had no faith in their directions, shook his head.

The speed of the ship was so great that she was soon near enough for them to make themselves heard.

"Take that passage!" shouted Will, holding one hand to the side of his mouth and pointing to the channel. "I overheard the men here say that you could save your ship by heading that way. The men are wreckers."

The captain made a motion with his hand to signify that he had heard the speaker.

Then his craft was headed toward the indicated channel.

A moment later the wreckers came up and seized the boys.

"We will pay you for this," said the one who, from the first, had seemed to occupy a position of authority over these people. "You shall not again escape us."

As he spoke, the ship went roaring past, along the channel, at the distance of about ten fathoms from the spot.

Captain Topman was seen now and then gesticulating fiercely at the wreckers, but, under the circumstances, he could do nothing to help the lads.

As the vessel dashed on, he was observed pointing a gun toward the group.

But the latter laughed derisively, knowing he would not dare to fire lest he should hit one of the boys.

On went the ship, and soon she was out of sight in the drifting rock that overhung some parts of the island.

"A fine trick you have served us, my lads," remarked the man who was called Bill by his companions. "Now what do you think we ought to do with you?"

"You should set us at liberty," answered Dick. "We have told you that we did not mean to join you."

"Hi, my fine fellow, but you know altogether too much about us now to be allowed to go."

The one who acted as captain of the party now paused, and, stepping aside, motioned to three of the men.

These men joined him, and a whispered conversation was, for a few minutes, held between them.

Then the boys were conducted by the three men in a direction opposite to that taken by their companions.

They proceeded a short distance when they came to a small inlet.

Here a number of rocks sheltered the place from the force of the gale.

A loud roaring noise attracted the boys' attention, and, looking a little to the right, they noticed that the water swept rapidly into an opening at the base of one of the rocks.

It flowed in a downward direction, in a broad, swift sheet, and was heard to fall to the bottom of the pit with a strange, hollow, rumbling noise, like smothered thunder.

Without saying a word to the boys, two of the men caught up each in his turn and pitched him headlong into the rushing current of water.

The lads, whirled along with swift velocity, were carried into the pit, and, as they felt themselves going down, with dizzying rapidity they gave themselves up for lost.

That the wreckers, in thus disposing of them, had hoped to destroy their lives in the surest and speediest manner was evident.

Carried into the rushing, foaming cauldron of waters, which was probably at the bottom of the pit, it seemed as if there was no chance of their ever being seen again, either dead or alive.

In fact, on reaching the gloomy depths of the cavity, the boys were soon almost suffocated by the turbulent water.

Suddenly Dick's hand came in contact with something which felt like a rope.

He grasped it firmly, and commenced to draw himself up by it.

When he had climbed to a height of about ten feet, he found himself before the entrance of a dark cavern, opposite the descending torrent.

Looking downward as he swung himself upon the edge of the cavern floor, he recovered his breath sufficiently to call out to his friend, who now had also grasped the rope.

"Come on, Will! The rope leads up here to a cave!"

Will, however, could not hear his voice.

The roar of the waters was so loud that it was drowned by the noise.

Having nearly reached the entrance of the cavern, the lad, who was much more exhausted than his chum, seemed about to let go his hold.

But Dick, reaching down, caught him with one hand by the collar and helped him along.

Gasping for breath, Will gained the edge of the cavern, and sank down exhausted by the side of his friend.

Finally he was able to speak.

He was obliged to shout to make his voice heard above the din of the rushing waters.

"We have escaped death so far. The wreckers little thought we would when they threw us down here!"

"Ay, they evidently knew nothing about the rope and the cave."

"I wonder if we can ever get out of this cave. We must explore it."

Both boys advanced into the cavern.

As nearly as they could judge, the roof was about ten feet high, and the width of the entrance about six.

Close to the entrance there was a boat.

It was from this that the rope, by which they had drawn themselves up, depended.

By the faint light reaching them from above, they could perceive that the boat was in a good state of preservation.

How did it come to be in this place?

The boys resolved to carefully explore the cave, which might result in their being able to answer this question.

The floor of the cavern had an upward slope, and as the lads moved on they saw a light ahead.

They hurried along and soon found themselves before the termination of the cave.

It was closed by rocks, and the light they had seen came down through narrow spaces between these rugged masses.

Evidently the existence of this cave was unknown to the wreckers.

CHAPTER V.

A TIMELY SHOT.

"Now, then," said Dick, "it is plain that the boat we saw was never taken into the cavern from this direction."

"No, it could not have been brought in here."

He reflected a moment and then added:

"It must have been drawn down into the pit and swept by one of the branches of the falling stream of water into the cave."

"How could that happen?"

"Easily. The boat, in descending, would naturally, owing to its formation, be thrown outward from the stream, and thus lodge in the cavity."

"I think you are right. I noticed that one part of the descending stream fell close to the cavern. This would have sent the boat into the entrance."

"Well, Dick, I hope we can make use of the boat."

"It would be a good thing if we could—in order to get away from here. We could go to some other island."

"Ay, the Society Islands should be in sight from here. We could see Ulictea, I should say, if there were no rocks in front of the entrance of the cavern."

"We must contrive, in some way, to move enough of those rocks aside to enable us to get out and seek provisions—otherwise we will starve to death here."

"We can find plenty of provisions at Ulictea, if we can once get there."

"Perhaps we may find a hatchet in the boat, which would enable us soon to cut our way out of the cave."

"Come, we will go and see. Then we will try to move the boat to this entrance."

The boys went back to the boat.

It was a small one—not much larger than a gig, and, taking hold of it, they found it easy to move.

Examining the inside, they there discovered not only a rusty hatchet but also a boat-knife.

There were no oars in the little craft, but a couple of paddles were thrust under the small locker forward.

They now proceeded to move the boat, and a couple of hours' exertion enabled them to get it to the entrance.

"So far, so good," remarked Will, "and now we will try if we can open a way through the rock in front of the opening of the cave."

A few blows with the hatchet showed them that the rock was easy to break, and in a short time they had contrived to make an opening large enough for them to pass in and out of the retreat, and also if necessary draw the boat through it.

"Now, then," said Will, "as we may want to come here again, we will shape one of the fragments of rock we see near us so as to stop up the opening, that the wreckers may not discover the cavern."

First they cautiously looked about them to make sure that they would neither be observed nor heard.

Their present position afforded them a view of a large part of the island.

The gale by this time had nearly subsided, and there was now a mist upon the reefs and the water.

Afar off they imagined they could hear peculiar noises—the shouting of voices, with which was blended the discharge of fire-arms.

"What can that mean?" inquired Dick.

"I am afraid," said Will, "it means that the Comet has struck a sunken rock, that the wreckers are trying to plunder the ship, and that Captain Topman is keeping them at bay with his muskets. As we have a boat, we might try to go in the direction of the noise, so as to see what is taking place."

"Come, then, I am ready," replied Dick.

First rolling a fragment of rock over the entrance of the cave, and taking particular notice of the locality, that they might recognize it again, the boys launched the boat in the channel near the front of the cave, and commenced to ply their paddles.

Not far had they gone, when, from behind a square column of rock, screened by the mist, which was very thick where they were, but which had lifted ahead of them, they were enabled to see what was going on.

Captain Topman's ship, about twenty fathoms off, was caught on a sunken rock.

She lay well over, but as her masts remained standing, it was evident she had not struck with much violence.

The wreckers, in a large boat, were striving to make their way to the craft among a large number of small rocks which were between them and the ship.

But Captain Topman, with two muskets he possessed, and with one of which he had armed his mate, was firing at them, thus keeping them back.

To avoid his shots, they would crouch in the boat every time he and his mate fired, then, while they were reloading, the outlaws would work the launch on its way.

Meanwhile there were men in one of the ship's boats trying to tow the vessel clear of the rock.

As the tide was rising, it was evident they would succeed in getting the craft clear before long.

"Lively, men!" shouted Captain Brand of the wreckers to his followers. "We must take that craft before she clears the rock."

The wreckers worked with a will.

They rightly judged that the Comet was a fine ship and carried a valuable cargo.

As her crew numbered but fifteen hands, they believed they could easily overpower them in a conflict.

In order to lighten the craft, that she might the more easily be cleared from the rock, various articles, by order of Captain Topman, were being thrown overboard.

All at once the skipper's eye was caught by a brass-bound keg, which, among other things, had been thrown over.

"Ay, now, confound you!" he roared out to the sailor who had hurled the keg from the ship, "you should not have thrown that overboard. It is the keg of gold-plated wire," he added, in a lower voice.

"I did not know that, sir," answered the sailor, "as I found it amongst the kegs of spoiled nails you ordered to be tossed over."

"That keg is worth many dollars, and must be brought back," said the captain.

He now noticed that the wreckers' boat was caught fast on a shoal close to the island shore.

As they were out of the boat, trying to shove it off, Topman imagined that their attention was distracted from the ship, which, in fact, had by this time been pulled nearly clear of the rock on which she had struck.

Deeming that the wreckers had given up all hope of plundering the vessel, Topman descended the ship's side to a reef which extended from the rock to the land, and made his way toward the precious keg.

It had struck the beach within a few yards of the wreckers' boat.

The captain hurried along, and had nearly reached the keg, when one of the wreckers, noticing that his gaze was upon it, and judging, by the expression of his face, that it contained something valuable, bounded forward, picked it up and hastened toward the boat with it.

At the same time another of the gang, noticing that the captain had drawn a pistol and was about to point it at the retreating wrecker with the keg, threw at him an iron bolt he had picked up.

The bolt striking the pistol Topman held, knocked it from his grasp.

It went whizzing through the air and fell upon a shelf of the square rock behind which were the two boys.

At the same moment the man who had thrown the bolt, sprang upon the captain, and, hurling him to the ground, caught him by the throat with both hands.

The man was a big, powerful fellow, and he held the old skipper's throat as if it was in a vise.

Topman turned blue in the face, and it seemed evident that he would soon be throttled, if not rescued.

Meanwhile, the mate from the ship called upon the wrecker to let go the captain, but he did not dare to fire, least the bullet should strike the prostrate man as well as his enemy.

Neither did any of the crew dare to leave the ship to go to his assistance, fearing that they would be overpowered and that the vessel would then be sure to fall into the hands of the outlaws.

"We must save the captain at all hazards," said Will to his friend.

The pistol being within easy reach of him, he grasped it, and pointing it at the wrecker who held the skipper, he fired.

The man gave a yell, relaxed his hold of Topman, and fell as the bullet passed through his side.

Then, while the attention of the gang was thus distracted, Topman arose, and, as quickly as possible, made his way to the spot where the crew of the towing boat, having got the ship clear of the rock, were ready to take him in.

He was presently aboard his vessel, and as there was a good breeze, the Comet soon left the wreckers far behind her, screened by the mist.

Owing to the thickness of the fog about the place where the boys were posted in their boat, the wreckers could not form an idea of the exact spot whence the shot had come which had wounded their shipmate.

Moreover, they were still tugging at their boat to get it clear of the rocks upon which it had grounded, and, though surprised and dismayed by what had just happened, they could not as yet look for the perpetrator of the deed.

CHAPTER VI.

THE IMPERILED CRAFT.

"THAT shot you fired was a timely one, Will," remarked Dick. "Little does Captain Topman know to whom he owes his life."

"No; he probably imagines the shot was fired at *him* by some one of the wreckers, and that the fellow missed his aim."

"Do you think we would be likely to fall in with the ship if we tried to reach her?"

"No, not in this fog. We are both pretty well fagged out, and we would only have our trouble for nothing. But for the confounded shoals in our way and the close vicinity of the wreckers we could have reached the craft while she was fast on the rock."

"Probably we will never see the ship again."

"Yes, we will. She must pass close to those reefs to get to her nation. There will be plenty of tacking, and, depend upon it, we will see her often."

"Ay, if we do not starve to death in the meantime. I am half famished."

"So am I. Let us look for mussels."

The boys plied their paddles, urging the boat along among the passages between the rocks, but they searched in vain for shell-fish of any description.

Suddenly Dick pointed out a dim object just visible through the mist, ahead.

This object, evidently the hull of a dismasted craft, lay between two rocks which were about fifteen feet high.

The stern was on a ledge above the surface, but the bow was submerged, with the water flowing over it as far as the waist.

"It is the hull of a sloop," said Will, as the boat drew close to the wreck.

A nearer view showed the boys that the wreck had lain there for several days.

There were evidences of all the most useful ropes, sails, bolts, etc., having been removed from about the deck—probably by the wreckers.

"We will go aboard," said Will. "The wreckers may not as yet have taken everything serviceable from the hull. We may find some things which may be of use to us in the cave."

"Ay, we must go back to the cave," said Dick, "if we can find it."

"We can find it. I know the bearings of it. I have taken good notice of every rock we passed after leaving it."

"Will," said Dick, grasping his hand, "I have a certain idea—a plan——"

"The same, I do not doubt, which has occurred to me," interrupted Will. "That is if we are not picked up by the Comet to make the cave our rendezvous, and thus have a secret place of resort whence we can frequently emerge to baffle the evil plans of the wreckers. Often do they use false lights and resort to other tricks to ensnare passing vessels. We will do our best to foil them and have them captured."

"That was not what I was going to say," remarked Dick. "It was merely that we could use the cave as our home until we found a chance to board the Comet. But I approve of your plan heart and soul."

"Ay, then let us pledge ourselves to hesitate at no risk to perform this good work," said Will, "as long as we can."

"Here is my hand upon it!" answered Dick.

They then clasped hands and vowed that they would stand by each other in all emergencies, while striving to save imperiled vessels from falling into the power of the fierce men of the reef.

The lads now kept on, and soon they were alongside the ledge upon which the sloop had been cast.

They tied the boat's warp to a spur, got out and boarded the sloop's hull.

The bulwarks were broken in many places.

Aft was a carpenter's chest, but every tool it had contained had been carried away by the plunderers of the vessel.

Descending into the main cabin, they discovered that all articles of furniture it had contained had also been taken off.

In one of the berths, however, they found some blankets, a box of matches, a candle in a candle-stick, and a sheath-knife, besides an oil-skin coat and sou'wester.

Then they went to the pantry, where to their surprise, they discov-

ered a boiled ham, a canvas bag full of sea biscuits, and a large stone jug, which was found to be full of fresh water.

There they also found a barrel half full of flour, but this, as they would not dare to bake it in any way, lest the smoke of their fire should be seen, could at present be of no use to them.

Some boiled salt beef and a number of cans of preserved meat were found there, however, and these were collected and placed with the other useful things they had obtained.

A few pine boards were picked up in a corner, and on one of the pantry shelves they found a number of rusty nails.

Opening the door of a side room, they there discovered a small table, some chairs and a large pile of coconuts.

They also saw some red and blue shirts, some canvas trousers and a couple of straw hats hanging from hooks in the wainscot.

Then peering into the hold through an opening in the bulkhead, they perceived plenty of spare spars, blocks and some coils of rope.

"The wreckers are not yet through with the sloop," remarked Will. "They will visit her again."

"I wonder what they have done with the crew of the vessel?" said Dick.

"Probably those who were not washed away from the craft when she was wrecked, were murdered. The wretches, as we have good reason to believe, would not hesitate at any crime for the sake of gain."

All the things which have been mentioned, excepting the chairs and table, and, of course, the articles in the hold, were conveyed by the lads to the boat, which they pretty well filled.

Having eaten a few of the biscuits, the boys seized their paddles, and were soon on their way back to the cave.

This, owing to Will's previous careful notice of landmarks to guide him, they finally reached.

Having deposited the things they had brought in the cave, and also drawn the light boat therein, they went to work to fashion a fragment of rock in such a way that it could be put over the entrance of the cavern, so that the opening would never be suspected by any person seeing it from the outside.

Then, having thus closed the mouth of their retreat, they there partook of some of the ham and biscuits and drank of the fresh water, which they found very good and sweet.

Next they spread their blankets and, lying down, they were soon buried in a slumber so profound, after their toil and long wakefulness, that they did not open their eyes until the following night was far advanced.

In the morning, after breakfast, they looked from the opening of the cave.

The fog had nearly cleared, but there were clouds drifting over the sky, indicating the coming of heavy weather before many hours.

Far away, half hidden by the mist, the boys could see a sail, which they doubted not was the Comet.

Evidently she was taking a long stretch on this tack, away from the reefs.

The next tack would probably enable her to clear the outermost reef, when she would have open water before her for the rest of the voyage.

"We must try to lie in wait for her," said Will. "We should go to the outermost reef, and there remain until we see her pass on the next tack. If she comes near enough to the reef for the crew to see our signal, we will show one."

"We cannot go. Look!"

And, as he spoke, Dick pointed out the form of the captain of the wreckers, who, near several of his men, stood not fifty yards from the entrance of the cave, watching the distant vessel.

At length the wreckers moved away to the right, and had soon passed out of sight of the watchers.

"Now I go to act as spy," said Will. "You stay here until I come back with my report."

"Better let me go," said Dick.

"No, I have made up my mind, and, besides, you'd lose your way. I am better than you at finding places."

So saying, Will made his way along shore, keeping behind a low ridge. He had proceeded a short distance, when, peering from behind the ridge, he saw the wreckers returning toward the spot he occupied.

The boy looked round him for some place of concealment, and, see-

ing a couple fragments standing on end, the top of each pressing against the other, he ensconced himself between them.

The wreckers came on and seated themselves on the ridge close to the concealed lad.

"As you say, Jack," Captain Brand remarked to one of the men, continuing a conversation begun before they reached the place, "that ship may or may not run upon the rocks. While we are waiting, we may as well board the brigantine to leeward and see what we can get from her."

"Not much, I think," said the wrecker Jack, to whom he spoke.

"Well, we'll go see. Who knows that we may not succeed in finding money in her cabin, as we did in the cabin of the sloop."

"I am ready to go with you at any moment," said Jack, "if you say so."

"Ay, you better go at once and board her, under pretense of piloting her through the breakers, where she is now carefully feeling her way."

"All right, the dingey in which that boy from the Comet drifted to the reef-cave is in the cove, not fifty fathoms from here. I'll go to the boat and pull out to the brigantine."

"Very well. Better be lively about it. Try and get the vessel upon the sunken rocks nearest the shore."

"You leave me alone for that," answered Jack. "I know what I am about."

The captain and all the men except Jack now moved off toward their retreat, which was some distance from here.

Jack rapidly walked along by the ledge until he reached the little cove in which was the dingey.

Will followed him unobserved, as Jack was on the opposite side of the ledge, and could not have seen him even if he had turned, for the lad kept his head bent so that it would be concealed from his view by the line of rocks.

The wrecker was a youth of about seventeen, and apparently strong and active.

Will had made up his mind that he should never board the brigantine if he could prevent it.

As the wrecker, having reached the cove, first taking off his jacket and throwing it into the dingey, pulled forth the boat, Will sprang toward him, pointing his pistol at his head.

The pistol was empty, but of course the outlaw did not know that.

On seeing the lad, whom he thought had been sent to certain death when hurled into the water pit, he gave a cry of superstitious terror, and would have fled but for the rocks which here prevented him.

"Into the boat with you, and row me out to the brigantine, or you are a dead man!" said Will.

The voice and manner of the speaker were sufficient proof that he was no ghost, and Jack regained his courage.

All at once, with a sudden spring, he seized the pistol and strove to wrench it from his opponent's hand.

A desperate struggle ensued.

CHAPTER VII.

THE STRUGGLE.

THE young wrecker being the elder and stronger of the two boys, succeeded in throwing down his antagonist and at the same time pulled the pistol from his hand.

He raised the weapon to deal the prostrate lad a blow on the head with it, for by this time, owing to Will's not having attempted to pull the trigger, he suspected that it was empty.

But Will dodged the blow, and, twisting himself, contrived to grasp the wrecker by his long hair.

Thus he was enabled to pull his head far down, and soon he had the youth under him.

The wrecker, now dropping the pistol, seized the rugged, projecting knob of a large rock hanging over from the edge of another to draw himself upward.

But his pulling on the knob caused the rock to totter, and ere he could rise to follow Will, who had sprung out of the way, the heavy mass fell upon his head with a horrid, crushing noise which indicated that his skull was crushed.

For a moment his lower limbs twitched convulsively.

Then he lay perfectly still.

He was dead.

Shuddering, Will picked up the pistol.

He looked about him, to perceive that the rocks surrounding the cave where he was were high enough to screen him from any person at a distance on the other side of them.

His gaze fell upon the wrecker's jacket in the boat.

He seized it, and, owing to its being a large, loose one, easily slipped it on over his own.

Then he picked up the youth's hat, which had fallen on the ground during the struggle, and throwing his own into the boat, put this one (which had been the wrecker's) on his head.

Into the dingey he now sprang, and pulled out toward the brigantine, which he could see to leeward.

Its position had prevented him and his friend from seeing it when they looked out of the cave.

It was apparently a neat little craft, and under fore-topsail, mainsail and jib, appeared to be feeling its way along a perilous channel, into which it had probably been forced by the late gale.

Will knew this channel well.

In fact, this part of the island reef was familiar to him, as he had cruised about it several years before in a cocoanut oil schooner belonging to Otaheite.

Not far had the boy proceeded when, looking landward, he saw the wreckers standing near their retreat, gazing toward him.

Evidently they supposed he was their comrade Jack, owing to Will's wearing, as stated, the coat and hat of that person.

As he drew near the brigantine, which was backing and filling (tacking) in the dangerous channel, he stood up and waved a hand to her. Finally, being close enough to her to hail her, he shouted:

"Ahoy, there—the brigantine!"

"Ahoy!" answered a short, stout man, wearing a brown pea-jacket.

"I'm coming to pilot you."

"You know the channel?"

"Ay, as well as I do my right hand."

"Good! I'll heave to for you."

"No, you needn't do that in this light wind. Just throw me a rope when I'm near enough and I'll soon be aboard of you."

"All right. Stand by."

As the dingey, under a few more strokes of Will's oars, glided close to the vessel, a rope was thrown and the lad drew his boat alongside.

Nimble climbing into the main chains, he was soon aboard.

The captain and his mate came toward him, and the crew—about twelve men, forward—stood looking at this mere lad, who had said he was capable of piloting their craft.

Will frankly told his story to the captain, who seemed dismayed on learning that there were wreckers on the reefs.

He shook the boy's hand cordially, and expressed his thanks for, and approval of the pluck he had shown in contriving to get off to his craft.

There was another listener to his story—a lovely young girl of fifteen, who had come up from the cabin.

Will subsequently learned that her name was Grace Grayville, that she was the daughter of a missionary on the island of Tahiti—that she had been to visit her father, and was now on her way back to Sydney, Australia, where she resided with her aunt.

Taking his place on the knighthead, Will proceeded to give his orders, and the Neptune—such was the name of the brigantine—was brought around almost dead before the wind.

"Steady!" shouted the boy.

"Steady it is!" answered the man at the wheel.

There was a foaming mass of waters directly ahead.

The captain ran to Will and asked him if it would not be best to keep the craft away from that spot.

"No—you would be sure to run on a sunken rock if you did that," the boy answered. "The danger is not where the white water is, but to the right and the left of it."

The officers and the men, however, looked much concerned as the craft rushed on toward the white, foaming patch.

But Will's calm, resolute manner soon inspired confidence.

With a sudden sweep the vessel entered that foaming cauldron, and now nice seamanship was required, as the current ran to right and left, impelling the vessel toward the rocks on each side.

Will sprang to the helm, and, as he gave his orders, assisted the man at the wheel.

The latter was worked rapidly, and thus the boy, keeping the craft nearly on a bee-line, guided her safely through the foaming waters.

But there were many more perils ahead.

Will's orders were constantly and rapidly issued, and fully an hour passed ere the brigantine glided into the open sea beyond the dangerous passage.

"And now I will bid you good-bye," said Will to the captain.

The latter vainly tried to induce him to accept pay for the service rendered.

The boy shook his head, smiled, and springing into his boat, was soon on his way back to the island he had quitted.

As he approached it, he saw the wreckers standing on a slight elevation watching him.

Evidently they were both surprised and angry because their supposed comrade "Jack" had guided the brigantine safely from the channel instead of running her on a rock, as he had promised to do.

The boy wearing the coat and hat of the young wrecker was still too far off for them to discover the deception.

Will hoped that they would remain where they were until he had taken the dingey back to the cove and made his way undiscovered to the secret cave.

But, to his dismay, when he was within about twenty fathoms of the cove, he saw the gang rapidly approaching.

"They will be sure to discover me, now!" thought the boy, "What can I do?"

All at once a sudden idea occurred to him.

He redoubled his exertions at the oars, and, in a short time, while the wreckers were yet some yards off, and screened from him by the rocks of the cove, he reached the latter place.

Jumping from the boat and quickly drawing it on the beach, he took from it his own cap, thrust it in his pocket, and then ensconced himself behind a rugged column.

A few moments later the wreckers came to the cove.

A cry of horror escaped them as for the first time they beheld the form of Jack, with his head and part of his breast covered by the heavy rock that had fallen and crushed him.

"Confound it!" cried Captain Brand; "he is dead now, and cannot tell us why he saved the brigantine instead of wrecking her."

"How could it have happened?" inquired one of the men.

"The fool must have stumbled and caught at the rock to save himself," answered the captain. "I've noticed how loosely that rock was balanced on the other. He should have had sense enough not to catch at it."

"Well, poor Jack is gone, and there's an end of it," said Bill.

"I wish he had lived long enough to tell me why he saved the craft we were waiting to have pickings from," said the heartless captain.

A few more remarks were made, after which the dead body was disengaged from the rock, and with a bowlder tied to it was cast into the sea, where he immediately sank out of sight forevermore!

CHAPTER VIII.

A FIERY TOMB.

AFTER having disposed of the body of their unfortunate comrade as stated, the wreckers left the cove.

Waiting until he saw them some distance off, Will, crouching, hurried along behind the rocky ledge, and soon reached the cave where he found his friend anxiously awaiting his return.

"Where have you been, and what have you been doing to keep you away so long?" inquired Dick.

Will explained in a few words.

"So it was you whom I saw pulling off in the boat?" said Dick, in surprise.

"Ay, did I not manage well?"

"That you did, and glad enough I am that you so nicely balked the wreckers."

The two boys now entered the cave and partook of some of their provisions.

Then they looked seaward through the cave-opening, and beheld the ship Comet now under full sail, heading nearly before the wind to clear the outermost island reef.

"She will clear it," said Will, "though the breeze is not very strong. But there is going to be a change of wind, and with it a heavy gale."

"Can we not go out to meet her, and be picked up?"

"We might, if the wreckers are not where they could see us."

He crept out of the opening, and took a cautious look about him.

Peering from behind a low rock, he saw the wreckers not fifty paces off, the captain with his glass pointed toward the Comet.

Then gazing leeward, Will could make out another sail, which he judged was the brigantine.

All at once he noticed that she was taking in her fore-royal and her mainsail. Then her fore-topgallant-sail flew up in a ball as it was clewed up, and the clews of her foresail also rose toward the yard.

"Ay, it is as I thought," said Will to Dick. "There is a heavy gale coming up, with a change of wind."

Even as he spoke the change of wind took place.

It blew in a direction opposite to what it was before.

Dark masses of clouds, with white water on the sea, betokened the violence of the gale.

The brigantine soon caught the tempest.

Will, watching her, saw her fore-topsail blown in an instant to tatters.

Her close-reefed foresail was loosened, but she could make no head against such a blow, and was driven toward the reefs.

A gallant struggle did she make, but all in vain.

At last her fore-topmast went over, dragging the main-topmast with it.

And now, a mere wreck, she was swept on toward the rocks.

Will could hear the exulting yells of the wreckers.

But at length the violence of the tempest slightly subsided.

The brigantine, with some canvas rigged on her two stumps was striving to beat up against the wind.

Not far from her was the Comet, which, caught by the gale, soon after she had passed the outer island reef, was also beating, close hauled, against the wind.

The direction of the latter had drawn her gradually toward the wreck.

For hours did Will and Dick watch the struggles of the two imperiled vessels.

At length the darkness of night hid the two crafts from their sight.

"Hist!" said Will, suddenly, as Dick was about to speak.

He had heard the sound of footsteps and voices near the cave.

Soon after, the outlines of the wreckers' forms were descried through the gloom, as they passed.

Several of them carried poles and covered lanterns, and the boys knew what this meant.

They were going to set up false lights.

"Now, Dick," said Will, after the men had passed, "we must do what we can to defeat the plans of those scoundrels."

"I am ready," answered Dick.

The two boys, emerging from the cave, followed the wreckers unseen in the gloom.

The gang kept on until they reached a ledge of rock about one hundred yards from the outer reef, toward which the two vessels were now heading, with some chance of clearing it.

The lights aboard the craft indicated their course.

The reef was so covered with the rack of the storm that this, together with the gloom, hindered it from being seen by the most careful lookout.

Two of the lanterns now were secured each to the end of a pole, and with a weight attached to the lower end of this pole to keep it in a nearly upright position, it was set adrift.

Moving up and down among the surges as it thus floated, the pole gave to the lanterns the appearance of being hung aboard some vessel. As it appeared to be moving safely along it was calculated to deceive the watchers aboard the ship and the brigantine.

Where those lights were they would naturally suppose was the open water beyond the outer reef.

Small vessels to and from Sahiti, often passed the place, and it would be thought the lanterns were aboard one of these craft.

"You understand what the villains are at?" remarked Will to his friend. "Seeing those lights, Captain Topman, and the captain of the brigantine will probably head for them, thinking they are in the

open sea, and the consequence will be that they will run afoul of the rocks."

"What can we do to prevent it?"

"We must make a fire to serve as a beacon."

"Where are we to obtain wood to make it with?"

"The wrecked sloop will afford us even more wood than is necessary."

"What! you mean to set fire to the wreck?"

"Yes, for the sake of saving our friends, I will do so. The fire will light the rocks hereabout and the sea for some distance, so that the crews can see how they are heading."

"Can we find the sloop in the dark?"

"I know the bearings. It is not fifty yards from here. See."

And, as he spoke, Will pointed to the dim outline of the wreck, just visible through the gloom.

The roaring of the gale had prevented the wreckers from hearing the voices of the two boys.

They now made their way toward the sloop, and had soon climbed aboard of her.

Descending into the cabin, they forced open the bulkhead, which had evidently been previously loosened by the wreckers, and made their way into the hold.

There they saw plenty of dry oakum and some tarred canvas which would burn easily.

Will lighted a match and applied it to the oakum in several places.

It blazed up in a moment, and the flames communicating with the tar and canvas, rose rapidly.

Meanwhile the dashing surges, now and then struck the bow of the wreck, lifting it from the rock, down upon which it would again fall with a violence that shook every timber fore and aft.

"We were just in time," said Will. "The sloop may go to pieces before long."

The two boys, as the fire spread, hurried toward the bulkhead, but they were still several yards from it when there was a tremendous crash, as the hull came down after being lifted by an unusually lofty sea.

It seemed as if the whole after deck had fallen in from above.

The fragments of plank and timber blocked up the bulkhead.

Then the lads looked at each other in dismay.

It was doubtful if they could have forced their way through the debris, even had they been provided with an ax.

Having no such implement with them, it seemed as if they must perish.

The flames were rapidly surging along behind them.

The heat was already becoming oppressive.

They could not make their way to the fore-hatch, to escape in that direction, as the flames were now bursting through it.

There was no time for delay.

In desperation they threw themselves upon the masses of plank and timber in their front and strove to remove them.

They worked as they had never done before.

It was a struggle for life.

At length Dick fell down exhausted.

The heat was becoming suffocating.

The hold was now like an oven.

"For God's sake, Dick, rouse yourself!" cried Will, as he helped his friend to his feet.

A scorching column of flame rolled toward them.

Both boys staggered and fell back among the confused mass of planks and timbers.

The fire was bursting upward from the wreck and rolling aft, toward which it was driven by the wind with a loud crackling, hissing roar.

"It is all over. We are lost!" gasped Dick.

"Ay, there is no hope for us," answered his companion.

Half suffocated, with the heat scorching them, the lads lay writhing in agony.

Then a tremendous din was heard.

The half-burned sloop, lifted by a rolling sea, was falling to pieces. Blazing timbers tumbled into the hold, sending thousands of sparks in all directions.

It would seem as if the boys now were destined to be buried in a fiery tomb.

CHAPTER IX.

A DARING SWIMMER.

Will and Dick closed their eyes, nerving themselves to meet the terrible fate they believed themselves doomed to suffer.

But all at once both felt a cool blast with a shower of salt spray in their faces.

The burning fragments of the sloop had fallen down the ledge into the channel, and some of the planks and timbers about them, which had not yet taken fire, had also slipped into the sea.

Refreshed by the cool wind and the spray, the lads crept along the ledge away from the steaming timbers in the water.

The waves dashing over them soon restored to them their strength and vigor.

They sprang to their feet uninjured, and looked behind them.

Save a few burning fragments still remaining on the ledge, every part of the wreck now was in the channel, the blazing wood fast becoming extinguished by the surging waters.

"It was a narrow escape," said Dick.

"Ay, that it was," answered Will.

"The wreckers must have seen us by the light of the flaming timbers."

"No, I think not. You can perceive that we are behind a slight elevation of the rock."

As he spoke Will peered from behind the rugged mass, and beheld the wreckers in the distance approaching the ledge.

Evidently they believed that the fire was the result of accident.

Loose matches might have been lying about the cabin after they had partly ransacked the craft, and becoming ignited, caused the conflagration.

"The sloop's gone," cried one of the gang, as they came up opposite the ledge.

"Ay, that's the last of her. We might have got more out of her. There were some spare spars and good coils of rope still in the hold."

"We'll probably have better pickings before long," remarked Captain Brand, jerking his thumb in the direction of the brigantine and the ship.

"I'm not so sure of that. The light from the confounded sloop showed them their bearings."

"Ay, it spoiled our plans, but they'll not clear the outer reef, for all that. They'll strike on the sunken ledge, which extends many fathoms from it under water."

The violence of the gale having by this time somewhat abated, the roar of the surges was not loud enough to hinder the raised voices of the speakers from reaching the lads as they remained crouched behind the column of rock.

Finally, after they were gone, Will said to his friend:

"I feel as well as ever. How is it with you, Dick?"

"I am the same. Fortunately we were not blistered by the fire. But have we not had all our trouble for nothing?"

"No. The brigantine and the Comet may strike on the sunken ledge. But had it not been for the fire the two vessels would have been stranded on the reef, within easy reach of the rascally gang. As it is, if they run upon the ledge, they will be in sight of any passing vessel, and the wreckers will not be so bold in venturing out to them. But come, there may be further work for us."

As they were about to leave the ledge they noticed a coil of rope, which among other things had drifted from the broken craft close alongshore.

"This may be of use to us," said Will, as he picked up the coil, which was a light one, and slung it over his shoulder.

The boys, still behind rocks which screened them from the gaze of the wreckers, kept on until the dying out of the last spark of the burning fragments left the locality in the same gloom as it was before the fire.

Then they advanced confidently and boldly, hurrying along a ridge of rock which, elevated some feet above the sea, led to the outer reef.

Finally, reaching this reef, they stood upon a rock and looked off toward the lights of the two vessels.

These were doubtless heading toward the open water beyond the reef, but, judging by the direction of the lights, the boys feared they would either strike the rugged point of this reef, or run upon the sunken ledge extending outward from it.

The gale had now abated to a moderately strong wind, which would enable the Comet to carry to-gallant sails.

The brigantine, however, having, as previously stated, lost her top-masts, could only rely on the canvas which she had rigged on her stumps.

Meanwhile, in the distance, the boys could make out the outlines of the wreckers collected on a high rock, which probably afforded them a dim view of the two vessels. As the boys were partly screened by a rugged column, their forms could not be seen by the gang through the gloom.

Suddenly the clouds, opening to the eastward, disclosed the full moon, which now threw her silvery radiance over the agitated waters.

There was still a heavy sea, and in this both the Comet and the brigantine were being wildly tossed as they kept on.

The Comet, under to-gallant-sails, was heading on a course which would carry her safely past the reef and the perilous sunken ledge.

But the brigantine, with her scant canvas and damaged hull, would, it was evident, run upon the ledge.

In fact, half an hour later, she was seen to strike it and go over nearly on her beam ends.

A yell of fiendish exultation from the wreckers was blended with the cries of the dismayed crew.

There she was, the brigantine, with the seas now and then breaking over her and causing her to thump upon the ledge with a violence which threatened to break her up in a short time.

With the wild waters surging and tumbling about the craft no boat could be lowered, except to be dashed to pieces on the rugged rocks around her.

Meanwhile the boys now and then heard a wild cry, as some of the crew was washed away to leeward by the incoming walls of water.

"Something must be done for those people," said Will. "I will swim out to them with the line we have and try to help as many of them ashore as I can."

"The wreck is fifty fathoms off," responded Dick. "You will perish in trying to get out to them."

"No, I was always a good swimmer, and, as I have had a chance to rest since our late hard work aboard the burning sloop, I am strong enough to make the attempt."

"I will go with you, and we can help one another."

"No, one of us must remain to keep taut the rope which I shall fasten to the sloop."

The boys could now see the forms of the wreckers as they hurried off, probably to launch their boat and watch if they might have a chance to get out to the brigantine.

Wishing to lose no time, Will descended to the reef, and, fastening one end of the line to a rugged spur, struck out with the other, secured to his arm, toward the dismayed hull.

Dick anxiously watched his brave chum.

He could see the dark head of the swimmer contrasting with the white, rolling surges as he receded.

Now and then the head would disappear, causing the watcher's heart to sink within him.

But again he would see it re-appear, and at last he perceived that Will was close to the wreck.

By this time Will was pretty well exhausted.

It had required his utmost efforts to keep from being swept to leeward of the brigantine.

Fortunately, however, he had occasionally been assisted by a sort of cross-sea, caused by the resistance of a line of rocks to the waves.

"Stand by the rope," he now shouted, on finding himself close to the stern of the brigantine.

He saw the captain and his mate standing by the taffrail, and, as he was lifted by a sea, he contrived to throw the rope upward with one hand.

The captain caught it and quickly secured it to the stumped main-mast.

Then, seizing the slack of the line, Will drew himself aboard.

All there was in confusion. Bedraggled ropes, broken spars and fragments of woodwork strewed the decks.

The men were clinging to belaying-pins and to the rigging to save themselves from being washed over by the seas, which almost constantly deluged the wreck.

In the companionway were the shrinking forms of Grace Grayville and the steward's wife.

"You can lower a boat," said Will "and draw it ashore by the line."

"Ay, brave boy, you have performed a noble deed in bringing that line off to us, and I know not how to sufficiently thank you for it!" said the captain.

"You make too much of what I have done," answered Will. "But you have no time to lose if you would get ashore."

The launch was lowered a moment later, some needful articles close at hand were thrown in, and the craft containing all the crew and the two females, was soon being pulled shoreward by means of the line.

This Dick kept as taut as possible, taking a turn with it about the rock to which it was attached whenever it sagged.

The launch was about half way to the shore, when a great sea striking the brigantine, rolled her over on her starboard side, with her lately rigged canvas dipping in the water.

"You came in good time," said the captain, pointing to the wreck. "Had we been aboard when she went over, we must all have been swept off."

A quarter of an hour later the boat, thanks to the exertions of Dick, as well as to those of her crew, was secured alongside the rocks.

CHAPTER X.

THE ATTACK.

THE men now went to work with some canvas, which had been brought off in the boat, to erect a sort of shelter for the two women.

This was put up on the lee side of an overhanging rock, and some jackets were spread out to serve as a couch for the females.

On this they lay down, and soon they were buried in a profound slumber.

Dick and Will, as the eight men of the crew stretched themselves out on the rocks, took turns at watching for the wreckers.

It was not likely, however, that these people would venture to molest the sailors unless they offered opposition to their plundering the wreck, which the gang could not do at present, in so heavy a sea.

Towards morning the wind had subsided to a very light breeze and the seas were gone down.

The hull of the brigantine had righted, and she now lay with her bow half buried in the water, while her after part was high and dry.

Just as daylight was breaking, the wreckers were seen coming up in their boat.

"They are going to board my craft," said the captain to Will. "I must return and do what I can to keep the rascals off. It is a wonder they did not make an attack on us before this."

"Doubtless they thought, as we did, that the vessel would break up," answered Will.

"She is a good, strong craft," said the captain, "but I fear she has been badly damaged by the thumps she has received."

The two women now appeared from the tent.

Grace had slept well, notwithstanding the hardships through which she had passed, and as Will looked upon her bright eyes and rosy cheeks, he thought he had never seen a lovelier girl.

All were soon in the boat, accompanied by Will and Dick, and in a short time they boarded the wreck.

An examination of the hold showed the captain that not much water was there.

Fortunately the vessel had struck upon a soft bed of coral, and her lower timbers had suffered little damage.

A hasty breakfast was partaken of, and the captain then made preparations for the defense of his vessel.

He possessed five muskets, which were brought up and loaded.

There was also a ten pounder forward, which, being well swabbed out, was thus dried, and rendered fit for service.

Powder and scraps of old iron for this piece as well as for the muskets were brought on deck. There was, however, only enough ammunition to last for a short time.

Meanwhile the wreckers coming on were soon within hail of the vessel.

"Keep back! What do you want?" shouted the brigantine's captain.

"We will let you know when we get aboard," responded Brand.

"It is easy to see what you are after. I need not have put the question, but you shall never board this craft if I can prevent it."

As he spoke, the captain leveled a musket toward the boat. The other musket was aimed at the same moment.

"Come!" shouted Brand, as he made a sign to his men to suspend their oars. "Why not let us have some of your valuables. They will do you no good. Your vessel is bound to go to pieces. You can never get her off that ledge."

"It does not matter—so long as there is a chance for me to stay aboard, I will defend her."

"What is your cargo?"

"That is none of your concern."

Brand moved the tiller and made a sign to his men, who then rowed past the stern of the craft as if going to return ashore.

All at once with a quick twist of the tiller Brand brought the boat's head toward the vessel.

The next moment, followed by all his men save one, who was left in charge of the boat, he sprang into the main-chains.

"Fire! Let them have it!" shouted the brigantine's captain, as the wreckers were getting over the bulwarks.

The report of several pistols in the hands of the outlaws was heard, and three of the Neptune's crew fell dead, their muskets dropping from their hands and harmlessly going off as they struck the deck.

The whole party of nineteen wreckers now flung themselves aboard.

They were armed with knives, pistols and hatchets, the latter having broad, keen blades.

There were, with Will and Dick, but eight persons to oppose them.

Each of the two boys had picked up one of the fallen muskets, and a tall, powerful sailor had possessed himself of the other.

"Down with them! Make short work of them!" cried Brand.

"Quick, men, to the gun! Keep the rascals back as well as you can, till we reach it!" shouted the vessel's captain.

The little party fought bravely.

Clubbing their discharged muskets, such of the men as had these weapons, struck effective blows with them, knocking down more than one of their opponents.

Will and Dick, boys though they were, helped the men considerably.

More than once did they dash aside, with well-aimed blows, an up-raised hatchet about to be brought down on some sailor's head. The wreckers, surprised at seeing these boys whom they thought they had sent to their death in the water-pit, were at first somewhat unnerved, but they soon recovered themselves. Meanwhile Captain Hollins and his mate had shot two of the wreckers dead, thus leaving seventeen. Vigorously pressed by these overpowering numbers, the little party finally reached the ten-pounder forward.

Will and Dick instantly slewed the piece round, so that the muzzle pointed toward the boarders.

Lighted matches had already been prepared, and now the roar of the gun was heard as it was discharged.

It had been loaded with some of the old scraps of iron, and as these flew among the wreckers four of them were killed outright.

The others, in dismay, had run aft, and sprung to one side out of the way of the deadly missiles before the gun was fired.

Brand was one of these.

"Now, then," he shouted, "upon them before they can reload!"

But one of the crew, who had been a gunner on board of a man-of-war, had charged the piece ere the panic-stricken wreckers could obey their leader, and pointed it toward them.

The moment they noticed this they climbed hastily over the bulwarks and scrambled into the boat.

Brand was obliged to follow them.

"Cowards!" he cried, "is this the way you obey me?"

"We didn't engage in this business for such work," answered one of the men, as all took to their oars, pulling away from the brigantine. "We don't care to be shot down like dogs!"

"Thirteen of you against eight!" cried Brand. "Bah! we would soon have taken the craft."

"It may be very well for you, captain, who have been a pirate in your time to talk that way, but we are 'innocent' wreckers."

At this the other men laughed.

Even Brand could not help smiling.

"Well, we will have that craft's cargo yet," he remarked. "Perhaps we will be able to surprise those fellows at night. You are not afraid to attempt that?"

"We will attempt anything in reason, Captain Brand, but we are not going to throw ourselves against a loaded gun for the sake of a few kegs of nails and some pig iron."

"Fool! you know well that such things bring gold. The settlers on the islands hereabout pay us good prices for them."

"Ay, some of them do, but it is a risky business. We are liable at any time to be betrayed to the people of some war craft, who would then come and snap us up."

"Yes, if they could catch us, but you may be sure we could escape before any such craft arrived."

Meanwhile aboard the brigantine the decks were being cleared of the dead.

Then Captain Hollins shook hands with Will and Dick, praising and thanking them for their good conduct.

The breeze had fallen away, and a calm now was upon the sea.

There was also a thick fog, but it was evident the Comet could not be far away.

"Your craft must break up in time," Will remarked to the captain.

"In fact, to say nothing of the danger you are in from the wreckers, this hulk, it seems to me, should be abandoned, especially as you have women aboard."

"You are right, and I was going to say the same. Do you think your ship would take off my cargo?"

"I doubt it not. Captain Topman is a whole-hearted man. If you like, I will go and explain your situation to him and how badly you are damaged."

Captain Hollins consenting, Dick and Will were soon in the gig.

As it was deemed best that the females, who had been much terrified by the late conflict, should be transferred as soon as possible to the ship, they were also in the boat, together with the steward, who had been permitted to accompany his wife.

Will had no doubt that he would easily find the ship.

And so, doubtless he would, but for a breeze which sprang up.

For hours the boys vainly searched for the Comet.

"We must try to return. There's no help for it now," said Will.

In the thick fog the boat struck the island some distance below the place where the brigantine was stranded.

It was now night, and very dark, with the sky covered by clouds.

Will, however, recognized the locality where he was as being near the secret cavern.

He headed the gig along shore and was soon close to the retreat.

The females were conducted into it, and while the steward attended to his wife, Will found a comfortable resting-place for Grace on one of the blankets which the boys had brought from the sloop.

The lads dared not light their candles, lest the wreckers should see the gleam through the crevice between the opening and the rugged fragment placed over it.

"Hark!" said Dick suddenly, laying a hand on his friend's arm.

The roar of a gun, dulled a little by the thick walls of the cavern was heard not far off.

"That is from the brigantine," cried Will, springing to his feet.

"We must go again and try if we can be of any assistance to Captain Hollins!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE BARRICADE.

THROUGH the gloom in the unlighted cavern, Will, as he spoke could see the black eyes of Grace Grayville shining like stars.

"Must you go?" she inquired, in a voice which betrayed anxiety. "Why not remain here? The wreckers may be in their boat, and meeting you, may seize you on the way."

"Dick and I ought to go," answered Will. "Captain Hollins is short enough of hands already, without losing our help."

"I will accompany you," said the steward.

And having calmed his wife, who had anxiously entreated him not to leave her, he quitted the cave with the boys.

Entering the gig, they rowed in the direction of the wreck, which as the fog had slightly cleared, was dimly visible ahead.

At the same moment there was a flash, which for an instant lighted up the darkness, and again the roar of the gun was heard.

The occupants of the gig had caught sight of the boat of the wreckers, not far off, heading toward the brigantine.

The outlaws were among some low rocks which, thus far had probably sheltered their boat from the shot fired at them from the Neptune.

Suddenly Will noticed that they were coming toward the gig.

Evidently they had seen it by the last flash from the gun.

This induced the lads to change their course.

But the wreckers contrived, by maneuvering in the dark, to head them off.

They dashed alongside, and several of them held on to the boat.

A lantern was lighted and the rays flashed upon the prisoners as they were seized by their captors.

"How now, my fine fellows?" cried the captain, on recognizing the two boys. "This is the second time we have seen you since we thought we had sent you to your death in the water-pit. How did you escape?"

"That we do not care to tell," answered Will.

"Better make sure work of it this time," said the wrecker, Bill.

"There is no hurry," responded Brand. "These people will do for a shield. They will not dare fire at us from the brigantine if we keep them between us and the vessel."

The prisoners' hands were bound with cords.

Then their boat was lashed alongside that of the wreckers', who now headed for the Neptune.

Captain Hollins, by the light of the lantern in the boat, recognized the boys and his steward.

As the wreckers had said would be the case, he now refrained from firing at the outlaws lest he should hit the prisoners.

This gave the gang a chance to get close to the brigantine.

Then suddenly cutting loose the gig, they allowed it to go adrift, and having fastened it by its warp to a rock, they dashed under the vessel's bow and began to clamber aboard.

The six men of the brigantine, however, were keeping a good lookout.

As the wreckers were climbing to the deck, three muskets were fired at them, and two of them fell headlong into the water, shot through the head.

The rest got aboard, and a desperate conflict took place.

The crew of the brigantine fought stubbornly, but they now had no chance to make use of their gun, as before, the outlaws having taken possession of it the moment they boarded the craft.

Encouraged by Captain Hollins, however, the sailors fought with the utmost desperation.

They used their clubbed muskets, crowbars and axes, so vigorously that their opponents could obtain no advantage over them.

Finally, seeing a chance the wreckers turned the brigantine's gun upon the crew.

A man was about to apply the lighted match, and, in another moment, more than half the little party must have gone down before the murderous discharge.

But ere the gun could be fired the report of a pistol was heard, and the man with the match dropped dead as the bullet passed through his brain.

It was Will Warden who had fired this shot.

The boy, revealed by the brigantine's lanterns, stood upon the knighthead to which he had evidently climbed from the gig.

And now, nimbly running along the rail, he joined the captain of the vessel and his party, who had retreated behind some bales of cotton cloth, which had been piled up near the cabin as a barricade ere the wreckers boarded the vessel.

"Well done," said Captain Hollins, "but where are your friends and my steward, who I noticed were with you in the gig?"

"The two are rowing the gig toward a light, visible a short distance off, and which may be that of the Comet. They will try to bring you assistance, if that proves to be the case. We managed to work our wrists clear of the cords fastened about them, and thus freed the gig from the rock to which she had been tied."

As Will spoke the wreckers made a rush toward the barricade.

Those who had pistols had reloaded them with the last of their small stock of ammunition, and the others, provided with knives and hatchets, held these weapons upraised.

The pistols were aimed and discharged, but not one of the shots took effect, as the crew dodged behind the cotton bales.

"Down with the barricade!" shouted Brand.

But, as the outlaws tried to pull it down, they were driven back by blows from the clubbed muskets and other instruments.

As the small amount of ammunition possessed by the brigantine's crew was now exhausted they could not reload their weapons.

"We are losing time!" shouted Brand, "Bring up the ten-pounder and with that we can batter down the barricade."

The wreckers went forward and proceeded to draw the gun aft.

They placed it within two feet of the barricade, and the match was applied.

There was a tremendous report and the gun flew to fragments.

It had exploded.

No one was hurt, and but little effect had been made on the barricade.

"We will take them in the rear," said Brand, in a low voice to his followers.

They climbed over the bulwarks and moved along on the outside of the vessel a few feet, when they tried to leap inward upon their opponents.

But the latter striking vigorously at them, caused the gang to make their way back to the part of the deck from which they had started.

Suddenly an idea occurred to Brand.

With the match that had been used to fire off the gun, he ignited one of the cotton bales.

In an instant a thick, black smoke rose from it, and blown aft by the wind, enveloped those who were behind the barricade.

While they were half blinded and choked by this smoke, the wreckers pulled over the bales.

The one that was burning they rolled into the sea through an opening in the broken bulwarks.

Then they attacked the crew, who, though fighting desperately, were obliged to fall back.

They made a stand near the taffrail, but it was evident that they would soon either be struck down or driven over the stern.

Brand, with a cutlass in his possession, aimed a blow at Captain Hollins, when Will, striking him on the head with the butt of his pistol, knocked him senseless.

But now ten wreckers, closing upon the party of seven, were about to level them to the deck, when a deep voice was heard ringing through the vessel, distracting the attention of all.

"This way, men—this way!"

It was the voice of old Captain Topman, who had arrived with twelve of his men, provided with crow-bars, axes and several muskets, to assist the brigantine's crew.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

WITH Captain Topman were Dick and the brigantine's steward.

They had arrived alongside the Comet very soon after the gig had been freed from the rocks.

The old captain, on hearing of the brigantine's situation and the peril of her crew, had at once ordered his launch lowered and manned.

As his ship was not a mile from the brigantine, it had not taken him long to reach the latter craft.

And now, rushing upon the wreckers and attacking them vigorously, assisted by Captain Hollins' men, the sailors soon overpowered the outlaws.

Three of their number were killed ere they surrendered.

Then the prisoners' hands were securely tied with ropes, after which they were assisted into their own boat.

"And now," said Captain Topman, "I hope there will be an end to the doings of such mischievous rascals on these reefs for the future. Glad enough," he added, shaking hands with Will, "am I to see you again. The moment I caught sight of you and Dick, there among the wreckers, I make up my mind that I would either effect your rescue in some way, or, if the outlaws should kill you before I could do so, that I would not rest until I had brought them to punishment."

Later, while the captain was conversing with Hollins about his cargo, Dick said to his friend:

"Can you guess who it was that struck you on the night you were under the cabin-window, in the boat?"

"No, unless it was the steward."

"It was not he. It was the fellow who assaulted the cabin boy last week."

"What! Ben Brose," cried Will, in the utmost surprise.

"Just so. Yesterday he went up of his own accord, to help loosen the mizzen-topsail, but slipped, while aloft, and fell.

"He broke his back, and when picked up, he moaned: 'It is a judgment upon me for striking down Will Warden, the other night.'

"He died in a few hours, but, before he breathed his last, he said he had struck you because you interfered between him and the cabin-boy, and prevented his beating him. He had been sent down into the cabin by the third mate to get some "marline stuff," when, seeing you under the window, he thought it a good time to have his revenge, and picking up a crowbar, he struck you on the head with it. He had meant to give you a deadly blow, but his arm caught against the window-sill, and this broke the force of the stroke."

"Ay," said Will, "it must have been a slanting blow, as I was not hurt much and soon recovered from the effects of it."

Captain Topman, having now arranged with the other captain to transfer his cargo aboard the Comet, took temporary leave of Will and Dick, who were to go to the cave to convey the females there to the ship.

With the boat containing the captured wreckers in tow, Topman soon had his launch alongside his own vessel.

The prisoners were then helped on deck, and were confined in the main-hold, the hatches of which were securely fastened over them.

Before morning Will and Dick arrived in the gig alongside the Comet with the two females.

The latter were assigned comfortable quarters in the cabin, the boys having given up their apartments to them and resolved to make their quarters in the steerage.

The calm weather continued, and before night the most valuable part of the Neptune's cargo was transferred to the ship.

This was done in good time, for a gale from the eastward now sprang up, and in less than half an hour after the Neptune went to pieces on the sunken rock where she had struck.

Looking through a spy-glass from the deck of the Comet, to which he and his men had been transferred, Captain Hollins, with a heavy heart, saw his vessel breaking up.

"I have sailed the sea for thirty years," he said, "and on no other

voyage have I had such bad luck as on this one. To say nothing of the loss of my craft, several of my men have been killed by the wreckers."

"Thanks to those brave boys, Dick and Will, the rascals can do no more mischief," said Topman.

"It was through the plucky exertions of the two lads, especially Will Warden's, that we at last contrived to make them prisoners."

"You are right," answered Captain Hollins, "and I shall speak a good word for those boys when I get home to New York."

A week later the Comet arrived at the Marquesas Islands.

An English man-of-war was found anchored off one of the islands, and the prisoners were transferred aboard of her to be finally sentenced to death.

An investigation showed that they were all mutineers, who had killed the officers of a ship called the Canton, aboard of which they were the crew, and then scuttled the vessel, afterwards going to live on the reef as wreckers.

In due time Grace Grayville left the Marquesas Islands aboard a schooner, together with the steward's wife and the late crew of the Neptune, bound for Sydney.

She had shown some emotion at parting from Will Warden, and after she was gone, the youth was, for awhile, more sad and thoughtful than usual.

Often did he think of the lovely girl, but it was destined these two young people should meet again.

The report of Will's good conduct on the reefs reached the ears of certain ship-owners, who put him in command of a fine ship bound to Sydney, Australia, with Dick as his first officer.

On reaching that port he again saw Grace Grayville, and renewed his acquaintance with her.

The result was as might have been expected—the twain were eventually united in wedlock.

They made a happy couple, and as Grace never liked to remain long away from her husband, she often accompanied him on his voyages.

[THE END.]

ROGER STARBUCK, the author of this story, is also the author of the following stories published in THE 5 CENT WIDE AWAKE LIBRARY: No. 986, "The Lost Boy Captain; or, The Secret of the Hidden Whirlpool." No. 972, "The Mystery of the Fire Ship; or, A Brave Boy Sailing Master." No. 966, "Chums to the Death; or, The Adventures of a Boy Marine." No. 944, "The Limbless Hunter; or, Si Slocum's Revenge." No. 936, "The Waif of Mystery Island; or, The Adventures of a Boy Who Was Kidnapped." No. 923, "Captain Jack, the Pirate's Foe; or, The Devil-Fish of the Indies."

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